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Dean Nell Jessup Newton's Address to the Department of Classics and Program of Arabic Language and Culture on the occasion of the Senior Recognition Ceremony, May 16, 2014, Notre Dame, Indiana

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Address to the Department of Classics and Program of Arabic Language and Culture on the occasion of the Senior Recognition Ceremony, May 16, 2014, Notre Dame, Indiana.

Thank you to Liz Mazurek for inviting me to address this distinguished group of – let’s face it – the best students at Notre Dame – the graduates of the departments of classics and of arabic languages and cultures.

I suspect the reason I was invited to address you is twofold: (1) I am known for brevity and (2) despite having been a Greek major at Berkeley some years ago, I managed to end up in what your parents no doubt have occasionally referred to as a “real job.”

It is true that I have had some success since graduation and I can say that my classical training had a great deal to do with shaping the person I was to become.

I am glad that I spent so many hours in the Berkeley library struggling with texts in Greek, not to mention commentaries on those texts in German, and sometimes in Latin. (Though I was a Hellenist, not a Latinist, one needed a smattering of Latin and German in order to translate, especially the racier bits in Aristophanes – those words the Greek dictionary defined in Latin and when one rushed to the Latin dictionary one discovered the definition given in Greek. I suspect the twenty-first century is a bit more transparent on such matters.)

Having asserted a proposition, I know I need to defend it. So, apart from having copies of LSJ, Dennistén’s particles, and Smyth’s grammar in my office to settle the rare question by a colleague about the use of a Greek term or aphorism in an ancient law text (“Thank God the Dean is good for something”, such faculty members no doubt thought), my training has helped me do more than sprinkle a few classical allusions into my conversation (something I don’t recommend – no one gets them).

Even during the years when I struggled to find a place in the world other than as a clerk or bartender – two jobs I held after graduation – my training came into play. After all, though I was a typist and filer, I was one of the best: attention to detail, error free typing, and as for filing – heck I really knew the alphabet – in fact I knew several alphabets. And as everyone knows, the best bartenders start preparing your drink of choice when you walk into the bar, so having a great memory is an asset in any profession. I will stress just a few of these many habits of mind and of body -- I will call these the seven habits of having received a highly effective education in the classics:

1. The ability to pay close attention to the text, a talent that has become second-nature to you – I suspect you even read tweets carefully. It will stand you in good stead whether you end up in college teaching, consulting, business, the arts, or a profession. For even if you are creating movies instead of writing or reading, you have developed the ability to attend to detail that is sorely missing in many of your compatriots.
2. Memorization is another almost lost skill –whether you’ve majored in language or literature you have developed your ability to remember ideas and their expression. Those who have taken the time to develop this ability are those who are looked to as leaders in almost any setting. It

seems like magic that they can pull something out of the air – whether it’s a clause of the constitution, a string of peptides, or a linkage between a musical phrase and the tradition to which it is paying homage.

3. The ability to concentrate, which in turn requires another habit – this one of body instead of mind:
4. what the Germans call Sitzfleisch – the ability to keep your posterior in a chair for a long period of time -- the companion to inspiration in breaking through creativity blocks.
5. Reading the classics also develops your understanding of different cultures and the diversity of ways that peoples ancient and modern understand the natural world and built environments.
6. Your reading has also helped you develop empathy by learning to place yourself mentally in a different world and time,
7. which in turn develops respect for different cultural traditions and a concomitant humility regarding the importance of the traditions with which you were raised.

All of these abilities helped me develop from a dazed and confused graduate – typing and filing briefs at a legal services office and bartending on the weekends to pay off student loans -- to become a law student, professor, and now dean. And each time I made one of these transitions, I was again aware that the habits and talents I honed as part of my classical training put me on a path to my present calling. (I cannot resist telling you that as a group classics majors outperform all others on the LSAT, so do give me a call if you consider law as a career.)

It is at this point in the speech that I am supposed to stop congratulating you on your fine education and start giving you sage advice – advice that you will recall again and again in the ensuing years.

That’s an impossible goal for a commencement speech, but I will say just two things: we each have a calling – find yours, it’s the hardest and most satisfying thing you will ever do and second, and related, it’s okay to fail. You’ve probably never failed at anything. I’ve failed in little ways and even some spectacularly big ways, but failure breeds self-knowledge and success and failure is part of most of our paths. Embrace it; don’t fear it.

Congratulations to all of you and,

Ave atque vale

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